"Ain't Gonna Worry No More": Depictions of the American South in Randy Newman's *Good Old Boys*

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Abstract

Randy Newman's album *Good Old Boys* (1974) is a southern concept album. Newman employs several narrators on the album in order to explore multiple perspectives and elements that illuminate southern identity. Newman's observations result in a view of the South as disenfranchised, defeated not only by their regional prejudice and own mistakes, but by moral hypocrisy and abandonment from the rest of the United States. In implicating the rest of the country, Newman indicates that the struggles highlighted in the South and southern identity are not simply a result of regional dynamics, but indicative of larger American dynamics. What's more, many of Newman's observations and commentary withstand the test of time, and maintain relevance to political and social dynamics still present today. In providing biographical, historical, social, and musical context, as well as close-reading the album, the thesis not only explores Newman's methods, but argues for his larger goals. Through analyzing and engaging with reviews of the album, both contemporary and modern, this thesis establishes *Good Old Boys*' lasting relevance and legacy.

For my father, who not only taught me how to listen, but encouraged me to speak.

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Never thought I'd make it, but I always do somehow.

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Introduction

If you can convince the lowest white man he's better than the best colored man, he won't notice if you're picking his pocket. Hell, give him somebody to look down on, and he'll empty his pockets for you.
— Lyndon Baines Johnson, 1960

One evening in 1970, Georgia's governor, Lester Maddox, appeared as a guest on the *Dick Cavett Show.* Invited on the show due to his controversial stance on race, Maddox was mocked by Cavett and the live audience before he could engage in any discussion. In an attempt to defend himself and demand an apology, he was met only with more ridicule. Eventually, Maddox just got up and walked out—on live television. This unknown episode, no clip of which is available online, would provide the main inspiration for one of the most fascinating creative works of its era, Randy Newman's *Good Old Boys.*

Like *Good Old Boys* itself, Newman's formidable reputation is due more to the admiration of critics and other musicians than any notable success with the general public. Newman's family played its role in shaping one of the great American musical traditions—namely, film scores—and Newman himself receives extensive praise for his pop records and his own film work. Yet he remains largely unknown. Due to his obscurity, and the relative rarity of his interviews, one might wonder who Randy Newman even is.

One answer is that he is a show biz kid who comes from a family of film-music royalty: he is the nephew of the Oscar-nominated conductor Emil Newman, *Hello, Dolly!* composer Lionel Newman, and the nine-time Academy Award-winning film composer Alfred Newman. Another answer is that he is the writer of popular classics for other artists, such as "Mama Told Me Not to Come," "I Think It's Going to Rain Today," and "You Can Leave Your Hat On." Some might think of him as a novelty artist, or a one-hit wonder, whose 1977 "Short People," a satire that many listeners took seriously, must be one of the

weirdest Top Five hits ever. People under the age of thirty, if they know Newman at all, associate him with his film work, particularly his Oscar-winning scores for Pixar animated films. Those who have actually met Newman say he is given to depression, a man who spends his days beside his L.A. swimming pool, lamenting his laziness and his second-tier status.

For all that he may be, everyone acknowledges that he is a master songwriter. Newman's melodies and arrangements draw deeply on the American songbook and its traditions; Newman will base a song on a New Orleans shuffle, a Fats Domino riff, a Joplin rag. But this music often frames ironic social commentary; there is a fascinating, uniquely Newman-esque dissonance between his biting lyrics and his earnest melodies.

One trait that distinguishes Newman from other composers or pop artists is his insistence, and unparalleled ability, to tell stories. Newman possesses exceptional narrative skill as a writer and uses those skills to reveal facets of the American experience that most would like to forget or ignore. In a genre—pop music—dominated by romanticized characters and situations, Newman's narratives often feature weirdos and outcasts. In his 1968 song "Davy The Fat Boy," Newman sings from the perspective of Davy's friend, who promises Davy's dying parents he will protect him, only to put him in a circus as a freak. In his 1972 song "Sail Away," Newman addresses the transatlantic slave trade through a slaver's "pitch," delivered to the Africans he seeks to enslave, in which he describes an exciting life in the New World. The adventure he promises, intended to be enticing, is grotesquely misleading, but expresses dreams about America that have an undeniable allure, despite the slaver's intentions to pervert those dreams. The fact that Newman floats this pitch on a deeply yearning, emotionally stirring melody and arrangement only emphasizes our

essential desire to believe in America as a paradise. The slave and the slaver, as they "sail into Charleston Bay," are entering a relationship that will debase them both tragically. Newman does not construct an easy listening experience; he implicates his listeners, not simply presenting these fraught narratives, but refusing to clarify that their eccentric, often deviant characters are substantively different from the rest of us—including the singer-songwriter himself.

Newman was one of those watching *The Dick Cavett Show* that night in 1970 when Lester Maddox was a guest. Having spent some years of his childhood living in and visiting his mother's home of New Orleans, he felt an attachment to the South—even identifying himself as "half-Southern" (White 16). Though he did not sympathize with Maddox's views, Newman was disturbed by the incident, and the moral superiority it revealed on the part of the implicitly northern-liberal audience. In a fit of anger, Newman, who was on the road touring for his second album, composed the song "Rednecks" in his hotel room—that is, without his piano, nearly unheard of for Newman, which suggests how pressing his inspiration was. A wounded retelling of Newman's experience watching the Maddox display, followed by a boisterous southern perspective on the divisive relationship between the North and South, the song would eventually provide the opening to *Good Old Boys*.

Newman's initial efforts to craft a southern album would result in "Johnny Cutler's Birthday," a narrative concept album following a single character, namely Alabama steel mill worker Johnny Cutler, as he approached his thirtieth birthday. "Concept albums first emerged in the 1960s as rock music aspired to the status of art" (Shuker 8). The concept album's heyday would extend well into the 1970s. Although Newman was not a trend follower, he would have been aware that an audience exposed by then to several years of concept albums

should be prepared to digest the sort of character-based song cycle he conceived in "Johnny Cutler's Birthday." But while "Johnny Cutler's Birthday" was certainly compelling—an expertly observed character study of a flawed man facing a politically charged world, as well as his own personal demons (Newman's forte)—Newman quickly abandoned the project due to its obscurity and narrow scope. "Johnny Cutler's Birthday" explored one man's life and experiences in the South, and was ultimately too contained. Newman, it appeared, had higher aspirations, and expanded the project into *Good Old Boys*.

Begun as a correction of the North's hypocritical dismissal of the South as ignorant and racist, *Good Old Boys* moved far beyond "Johnny Cutler's Birthday," growing into a polyvocal exploration of southern identity that revealed a more complex humanity than in the northern mythology of the South. *Good Old Boys* ultimately addresses the disenfranchisement—from political power, from wealth, and from social dignity—at the core of southern identity. Newman depicts a population stung by broken promises who, in turn, lets others down; who experience cultural oppression and, in turn, oppress others; are haunted by a more glorious past (both personal and historical); and, forsaken, fall victim to self-loathing, sentimentality, substance abuse, poverty, political demagoguery, pervasive racism, and cheap regionalism. I argue that, in articulating through music and lyric the juxtaposition of struggles, frustrations, and defiant racial pride that, to many people's minds, defines the South, Newman's album suggests that southern struggles are fundamentally American struggles. Though recorded and released in the Watergate Era, I argue that this commentary of America's view of the South in *Good Old Boys* remains relevant today.

In order to understand the implications of *Good Old Boys*, as well as grasp the layers of Newman's intention, it is vital to explore and analyze the work through multiple lenses,

much as Newman used multiple elements in his approach to the record's subject. Newman's own awareness of the themes and dynamics explored on *Good Old Boys* likely stemmed from familial ties and his own exposure to the South. This influenced Newman both musically and topically, and affords context to the compassion that Newman exhibits on the album. In addressing Newman's personal ties and understanding of the South, this context not only grants him a certain credibility but also illuminates his motivations. Identifying those motivations gives clarity to the reasons for the transition from "Johnny Cutler's Birthday" to *Good Old Boys*, where Newman departs from a narrative concept album to a thematic concept album. By working through the entirety of *Good Old Boys*, exploring the historical, social, and personal contexts as well as Newman's artistic choices, I will identify what exactly makes this album work so effectively and perennially. This allows us to understand the genius mechanisms that Newman implements on structural, musical, and environmental levels to achieve a jarring and poignant commentary on the state of the American South. Finally, I will consider several reviews of the work—both contemporary and modern—to explore the reception to the album. Following that, I will consider how well the mechanisms employed by Newman were understood by these reviewers and those effects on the legacy of the album.

Randy Newman does not only provide striking commentary and observations of American society, culture, and politics on *Good Old Boys*. In his exploration of various personae and circumstances—historical, current, and wholly fictional—Newman emphasizes the importance that these events do not just affect a population, a number of people, but a people's identity. Although the characters featured on the album are at times grotesque or difficult to understand, Newman never omits or neglects their humanity, and, ultimately,

Good Old Boys is an album about people. This is not lost on Newman; while he may be a musician, he is first and foremost a storyteller. He said so himself, “Perhaps I’m a short story writer who got stuck with being a musician.”

The Story of *Good Old Boys*

Randall (Randy) Stuart Newman was born November 28th, 1943, in Los Angeles, California**.** His father, Irving, was serving as an army doctor in Italy at the time of his birth, so Newman's mother, Adele, decided that they would leave L.A. The pair crossed the United States and made their way through the South until they arrived in her hometown of New Orleans. Although Newman spent only two years of his childhood actually living in New Orleans (before being reunited with his father following the war and returning to L.A.), he would return to it throughout his youth, and the city left a lasting impression on him.

Newman's family history was deeply rooted in the South. His parents met in New Orleans at a dance in 1937, while his father was attending medical school at Louisiana State University. Although born in Brooklyn, Adele had grown up in New Orleans; she was even nicknamed "Dixie." Within two years of meeting, the couple was married and moved out to Los Angeles, where Irving's family resided. Despite the move, Newman would later recall that his mother "kept her New Orleans accent her whole life," and he and his family would continue visiting the city regularly until he was eleven years old (White 16).

Newman was a quiet kid, cross-eyed, and awkward around girls. His father was attuned to the possibility of musical prowess from his children, so when Newman exhibited interest in music at a young age, Irving got him a piano and lessons. Newman's musical lineage permeated his life, and he began writing professionally at the age of seventeen. Following high school, he attended UCLA to study music, dropping out a semester short of graduation to pursue his music career. In the early 1960s, his name began appearing on song credits.

From the beginning, Newman was a tough fit for the music industry's demand for trendy product. His early exposure to New Orleans shaped his musical landscape. His foremost influences were Ray Charles and Fats Domino. "My natural inclination is to write shuffles—which is what's kept me selling under a certain amount—but that's what comes out of me. What comes out of Phil Collins makes him lots of money. My natural thing is to write these ancient shuffles. I have to fight against it, or there'd be too many of 'em" (Coan). Newman's tendency to write what he was compelled to would be the root of his artistic successes and his commercial failures.

Newman persisted in a pop music career, but his musical idiosyncrasies—in particular, his nagging impulses to create unconventional music—made this difficult. Newman wasn't like his contemporaries: he was married with kids, and he wrote songs that few clients saw as potential hits. But thanks to the encouragement of his childhood friend, eventual record producer Lenny Waronker, Newman got behind the mic himself. In the span of six years, he released three albums, all of which received glowing praise, if meager sales. He earned recognition and respect from his contemporaries and music journalists alike, and, in a time when record labels were more patient with their artists, began to build his career.

The roots of Newman's fourth album, *Good Old Boys*, lie in the aforementioned 1970 episode of the *Dick Cavett Show*. Broadcast on ABC from New York City during the late 1960s into the mid-1970s, the *Dick Cavett Show* acted as a commentary on the cultural upheaval of the times, and could be said to represent the "television wing" of the New York intelligentsia. The show featured intellectual conversations between rock stars, writers, movie stars, and politicians, all of it presided over by the urbane Cavett, who, despite his considerable charm, was prone to heated and contentious conversations (Dyess-Nugent). This

particular episode had a southern theme, and along with Lester Maddox, included African American football player and black activist, Jim Brown, and writer Truman Capote.

Maddox had a unique rise to power. He was a restaurant owner in Atlanta who eventually ran for office, losing a few mayoral elections before receiving a fluke nomination and running for governor of Georgia as a Democrat.[1] Due to write-ins, neither Maddox nor his opponent received a majority of the votes, and ultimately the decision was given to the Democratic-leaning state legislature, who gave the office to Maddox (Nystrom). Maddox, who had sold his restaurant rather than serve black patrons following the establishment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, was invited to the show likely because of his status as a staunch segregationist (Courrier).

Despite the dissonance between Maddox's beliefs and his own, the incessant mockery of Maddox affected Newman. He was bothered by the audience's nearly animal-instinct impulse to humiliate Maddox before he had even been given the opportunity to provoke such a response.[2] "He wasn't even given the chance to prove what an idiot he was," Newman would later say. "He didn't get a chance to do anything, and they had just elected him Governor, in a state of six million or whatever, and if I were a Georgian, I would have been offended, irrespective of the fact that he was a bigot and a fool" (Jordan). To Newman, the events that transpired on the *Dick Cavett Show* not only signified the deep—and sad—division between the North and South; it exposed easy assumptions in the northern liberal mindset that allowed a feeling of superiority over the South.

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[1] As we look back on this era, now a half-century passed, it is important to note that the South in that time was solidly Democratic. This does not mean it was liberal on social issues, including race relations. A Southerner's devotion to the Democratic party in the pre-Reagan era was a vestige of old North/South contrasts (e.g., agricultural vs. industrial), many of which dated back to before the Civil War.

[2] In an interview over thirty years later, Cavett indicated that he was aware of the tension, and allowed that his wording and demeanor was in an attempt to provoke Maddox (Gladstone).

Stirred by the episode, Newman conceived the song "Rednecks," which led to "Johnny Cutler's Birthday." He grappled with the project until February 1st, 1973, when he sat down in the studio and recorded it in its entirety, along with contextual and self-critical disclaimers preceding each song. Newman was dissatisfied and abandoned the project. However, Newman was contractually obligated to deliver *something*, and although he was initially reluctant to move the project in a new direction, Newman eventually shifted gears towards *Good Old Boys*.

Good Old Boys didn't completely forsake Johnny Cutler—his narrative still appeared in fits and starts on the album, although he was no longer named, and it was no longer his birthday.

"Johnny Cutler's Birthday" (1973)	*Good Old Boys* (1974)
1. "Rednecks"	1. "Rednecks"
2. "If We Didn't Have Jesus"	2. "Birmingham"
3. "Birmingham"	3. "Marie"
4. "The Joke"	4. "Mr. President (Have Pity On The Working Man)"
5. "Louisiana"	5. "Guilty"
6. "My Daddy Knew Dixie Howell"	6. "Louisiana 1927"
7. "Shining"	7. "Every Man A King"
8. "Marie"	8. "Kingfish"
9. "Good Morning"	9. "Naked Man"
10. "Birmingham Redux"	10. "Wedding In Cherokee County"
11. "Doctor, Doctor"	11. "Back On My Feet Again"
12. "Albanian Anthem"	12. "Rollin'"
13. "Rolling"	13. "Marie (Bonus Track)"

Although the projects maintain close ties, the differences are far from negligible—the most notable being Newman's divergence from Cutler as the narrative's central character. While Newman sacrifices many of the benefits of a coherent narrative arc—visible character growth, audience investment in the protagonist, etc.—in his transition to *Good Old Boys*, the ultimate results more than justify the loss.

In place of a central protagonist, Newman implements a broad range of perspectives on *Good Old Boys* to create a wider view of the South. As is typical of Newman, he uses various personae to distinguish himself from his narrators, as well as introduce believability and versatility into his storytelling. Although there is not necessarily a narrative arc, *Good Old Boys* remains a focused work, as Newman utilizes polyvocality, "the use of multiple voices as a narrative mode within a text, typically in order to encourage diverse readings rather than to promote a preferred reading," to maintain a sense of cohesion throughout the record (Chandler 327). In concordance with the music and other narrative devices—humor, affected grammar, historical references, social commentary, etc.—Newman creates a complex album that explores both personal struggles and national concerns. *Good Old Boys* reflects the nuance and complexities that influence and define American southern identity, as well as the political and social climate of his time. In abandoning Cutler and, as a result, significantly widening the scope of the record, Newman puts the South at the center of the album.

SIDE ONE

Good Old Boys begins with the *Dick Cavett Show* incident. The opening cut, "Rednecks," shares Newman's experience of viewing the televised humiliation of Lester Maddox, though from a perspective that we immediately realize is not Newman's: "Last night I saw Lester Maddox on a TV show / With some smart-ass New York Jew." A Jew himself, Newman immediately distinguishes himself from his narrator when the television show host—who we safely assume is Cavett—is identified as a "smart-ass New York Jew."[3] Newman utilizes the phrase "New York Jew" to recognize "New York" and "Jew" as "other" from the narrator, while "smart-ass" modifies these categories to give them a negative connotation and indicate hostility on the part of the narrator. The narrator's animosity signals not only an opposition towards the host but a camaraderie with Maddox. He names Maddox and insults Cavett; we can infer that the narrator is not a typical Cavett viewer, but a southern viewer tuning in.

As Newman's narrator continues to recount the scene, he describes Maddox as the victim of an unsympathetic, hostile TV audience: "And the Jew laughed at Lester Maddox / And the audience laughed at Lester Maddox too." There is antagonism between the southern viewer and the northern viewers on the show. It is clear that Maddox and Cavett—along with his audience—are being used as representations of the South and North respectively. The divide between the two regions is indicated by mockery from both sides—name calling on

[3] There is one caveat to this description: Cavett himself was not a Jew. In fact, Cavett would later remark over the line, "Yeah, I'm two out of three of those things" (Stafford 105). Though the misinformation on Newman's part initially appears strange, it quickly distinguishes Newman from his narrator. Furthermore, by reducing Cavett to his (fictional) religious or ethnic roots, Newman avoids naming him directly. Although this didn't afford him much anonymity—as Newman does identify Cavett in interviews—it takes away the focus from Cavett specifically in the context of the album. Newman foregoes strict adherence to facts here to emphasize his theme of cultural division.

the part of the southern narrator and laughter from the northern TV audience. The narrator refers to Cavett once again as "the Jew," continuing to diminish him by categorizing him as the "other." However, Newman utilizes the Maddox's humiliation to indicate a power imbalance. Although the narrator wields a certain weight, as the listener experiences his perspective, he is up against Cavett and his audience, who have the upper hand in setting the tone for a national narrative that grants superiority to the North.

By setting the scene as a power play between symbols for the North and South, Newman lays the groundwork for the greater significance of the narrator's response to the display: "Well, he may be a fool but he's our fool / If they think they're better than him they're wrong." When the northern television crowd and Dick Cavett attack Lester Maddox, it is not only an attack on Maddox himself; although Maddox's experience on the *Dick Cavett Show* is his own, the popular national broadcast widens the influence of the dismissal—it is not simply a dismissal of Maddox, but of the South, which includes the song's southern narrator. In response, the narrator is moved to express solidarity with Maddox. Although the identity of the South is diminished, the narrator must own it, as it is the identity he has. By showing us the perspective of a southerner who identifies with Maddox, Newman shows that a northern dismissal of southern identity is glib, but the southerner-narrator also exposes himself.

The narrator reflects on the display of Northern moral superiority: "So I went to the park and I took some paper along / And that's where I made this song."[4] Emphasized by the power imbalance present in Maddox's experience on the *Dick Cavett Show*, Dick Cavett and

[4] "The park" being "Red Mountain Park," according to Newman in his recordings for "Johnny Cutler's Birthday." However, based on the descriptions Newman gives of the park in the recording, it appears he's hoping for an imaginary playground at Vulcan Park, home of the statue of Birmingham, signifying its history in steel and industry.

his audience assume they already know what he will say and decide Maddox should not bother to speak—thus removing the opportunity for a dialogue, which would imply an attempt to understand. The narrator reveals his motivation to write the song, not as a belligerent response to the mocking of Lester Maddox, but as an opportunity to defend the South against superficial—and harmful—perceptions from Dick Cavett and his audience. Newman gives a voice to his narrator as someone not merely upset by the disrespect and mistreatment of Maddox, but as someone who is affected—someone who could be judged the same way, and suffers as a result of these perceptions.

The music shifts into a jaunty tempo under a ragtime riff as the focus moves from the *Dick Cavett Show* to addressing southern stereotypes. The upbeat music matches the underlying defiant celebration of southern identity, but the words themselves are sarcastic, meant to call into question their validity with a triumphant tone. Here, the narrator displays his southern pride: "We talk real funny down here / We drink too much and we laugh too loud." These comments are a pointed response to the northern audience. The narrator is being ironic, of course. He does not find southern accents "funny"; he is mocking the association between southern dialects and ignorance or brutishness, so it acts as a comment on superficial regional prejudice. The acknowledgement of drinking plays a similar role: alcoholism is offered as a trademark of rural southern life, an assumption that cultivates a false image of the carefree and less-burdened lifestyles of simple, uneducated folk. The narrator is not only continuing to criticize oversimplified northern perceptions of southerners, but utilizes sarcasm to criticize the northerners for holding these perceptions; this displays both an indirect self-advocacy—since his sarcasm implies that the truth of his society is

being underappreciated—and denunciation of northern perceptions as he attempts to take back his southern identity.

The narrator maintains his provocative tone, further widening the gap between the two regions when he sarcastically acknowledges the South's simple inferiority to the North: "We're too dumb to make it in no Northern town." There is the conspicuous misuse of grammar; Newman employs the double negative, where the "no" should be an "any," in order to signal that the narrator is uneducated. There is the acknowledgment of the social hierarchy imposed by those "up North," and the misused grammar reiterates the ideas of regional (un)intellectualism. This is Newman's expertly orchestrated authenticity at play: ironic in its execution on a larger level and in its normalcy on the level of the narrator. In operating on these two levels, Newman communicates both the narrator's frustrations regarding his diminished status and the arrogant superiority of the North, while his narrator boasts the stereotypes and preconceptions that gave the narrator—and his region—that reputation in the first place. This dynamic is simultaneously authentic to the character and satirically potent, though it does beg the question: is he putting on a dumb-southerner routine, or does he really talk this way?

Up to this point, Newman and his narrator have addressed the hierarchy established by the North over the South—one the North takes for granted and the South must live with. But this hierarchy is not one established simply between northern, white liberals over the poor, white, southern working-class. In the following line, the narrator boasts a pillar of southern regional status: "And we're keepin' the niggers down."

The racial slur, undeniably, stands out. According to Randall Kennedy, author of *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*, "*nigger* has become the best known of

the American language's many racial insults, evolving into the paradigmatic slur. It is the epithet that generates epithets" (22). Although the word has nearly always held negative connotations, "[by] the end of the first third of the nineteenth century, *nigger* had already become a familiar and influential insult," and the word took on an identity of oppressive control through the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights Era (Kennedy 4). Its use is glaring in "Rednecks," which, up until this point, maintains a somewhat lighthearted tone even while it addresses serious social divisions.

Newman's use of the word is jarring, to say the least, and left many members of his audience wondering if he was justified in its use. Newman himself was uncomfortable with the word; in an interview with Duncan Campbell for *The Guardian* in 2003, he said, "To me, the justification for a white person to use that word is a very narrow window." However, he went on to say, "I thought I needed it for the song, but I was never that comfortable with it. I don't like writing it down, I don't like saying it and I hate hearing it, but not in the context of the song. It still isn't OK for any white person to say the word, almost never." However, Kennedy validates—though not engaging with "Rednecks" specifically—Newman's use of the word regarding the intention of the song:

> There is nothing necessarily wrong with a white person saying 'nigger' just as there is nothing necessarily wrong with a black person saying it. What should matter is the context in which the word is spoken—the speaker's aims, effects, alternatives. To condemn whites who use the N-word without regard to context is simply to make a fetish of *nigger* (41).

Within Kennedy's parameters, Newman is absolved where his narrator is not, which is exactly the point. "Rednecks," and how it addresses the place of racism in the South, is a prime example of Newman's expert use of persona. Newman's narrator, in proudly declaring this facet of southern identity, displays his racism and fulfills northern expectations of the

South that, up until this point, the listener had been asked to call into question. There is no justifying his use; it is hateful, oppressive, and indicates a deep regional prejudice. He is desperately clawing for some kind of superiority as he attempts to defend the status of the "redneck," and the audience is not meant to sympathize with him.

Newman's intention is not as straightforward. He is, through his narrator, acknowledging a more sinister facet of southern identity; hidden among the self-congratulatory defenses of more superficial aspects of southern identity, there are insidious elements present. In order to accurately represent the South, Newman must look at the whole—not only the under-appreciated humanity, but the terrible flaws. However, we cannot forget the context of the song, and though Newman is not validating this mindset or idea, he is indicating that this regional, racial pride is a defiant and desperate power grab. "Rednecks" only addresses one aspect of Southern culture—that is, how it is too easily dismissed by a hypocritical North. But Newman's narrator does not recognize the substance behind the North's problems with the South's very real flaws; his response is, if true in parts, inadequate, and suggests flaws in the narrator and his own society. The narrator has included this racial slur as part of long list of obviously satirical exaggerations about the South, but this point rings hollow because it is in fact true and is a brutal aspect of Southern culture.

The narrator moves on, listing off southern stereotypes from all over the region:

> We got no-necked oilmen from Texas
> And good ol' boys from Tennessee
> And college men from LSU
> Went in dumb – come out dumb too
> Hustlin' 'round Atlanta in their alligator shoes
> Gettin' drunk every weekend at the barbecues
> And they're keepin' the niggers down

The narrator delivers this list of identities in the same tone as the previous lines as a sarcastic fulfillment of Southern stereotypes. The first two lines relay simple clichés, broadly evocative images that indicate inferiority, before moving on to a perception of the unintellectual South via a swipe at the South's institutions of learning: Newman's narrator admits (insincerely, of course) that, at Louisiana State University, one goes in "dumb" and comes out "dumb," suggesting low standards of admission and a mediocre education. This perpetuates the uneducated reputation of the South by devaluing standing institutions, which continues the perception of the South's lack of intellectual capital or proper academic process. The verse ends with observations of the overtly stereotypical "alligator shoes" of Georgians and the brazen drunkenness of southerners in general, which implies the cultural absence of responsibility, touching on earlier claims of laziness as a southern trait. Newman ups the ante in this facetious game at the end of the verse by repeating that cutting, recurring, racist line.

The song gains steam as it goes on, moving away from its ragtime riff and into a more boisterous, almost country-rock chorus to support the raucous declaration, "We're rednecks, we're rednecks." This is aptly placed after all these ironic condemnations of southern identity. The narrator—and his buddies, as indicated by the "we"—own their identity as both a defense of their southern way of life and in defiance of northern perceptions. The declaration is partly a continuation of the many southern stereotypes the narrator has owned up to, but it also has an unmistakable ring of camaraderie to it. The upper hand established by the North does not encourage the South to follow in their footsteps—it is a divisive action. The southerners make the choice, as they did with Maddox, to claim the bad along with the

good in southern life because rejecting northern standards is all the power they have. The chorus continues:

> We're rednecks, rednecks
> And we don't know our ass from a hole in the ground
> We're rednecks, we're rednecks
> And we're keeping the niggers down

The word "rednecks" emerged in the 1800s and evolved as an American regional slur (Marshall). The slur developed in the 20th century, ultimately to diminish working-class or poor white southerners. According to the *Dictionary of American Regional English*, a "redneck" is a "poor, White, rural Southerner—used with a very wide range of connotations, but…especially applied as a derogatory term for a White person perceived as ignorant, narrow-minded, boorish, or racist." The chorus of "Rednecks" is proclamation, presented as a reappropriation of the word.

However, it appears that Newman's narrator does not necessarily invalidate these definitions.[5] Instead, he takes pride in them. Prior to the chorus, he has proved that he *is* ignorant, narrow-minded, boorish, and racist, and it appears that all he does to reappropriate the word is present this all as a good thing, or at the very least, just the way it is. The comment that Newman is probably making is that this defiant pride is motivated by powerlessness; they cannot change their position or the perceptions of them, perhaps because there is truth to the identity, and so they must find pride within the classification, or be completely invalidated. While Newman's intention is to satirize northern caricatures of southerners, the truth of a proudly racist society does peek through.

[5] There is some debate over whether or not the term "redneck" has been successfully reappropriated in its definition. According to Patrick Huber in his article, "A Short History of Redneck: The Fashioning of a Southern White Masculine Identity," "redneck" gained a new, more positive meaning in the 1970s and 1980s as a term for Southern masculinity. However, Emily Glaser, in her article "Origins of the Term *Redneck*," states: "Since the 1970's, the term *redneck* has taken on almost entirely negative connotations."

Once again, the narrator's perceived superiority over black people is established as a foundation of the "redneck" identity; this is the final word on the matter, representing a fundamental reality and characteristic when considering southern identity and what that entails. Newman juxtaposes these slurs with distinct intentions; the racial slur is entirely unveiled, shameless in its cruel presentation, stated as an assertion of dominance. However, the regional slur "redneck," reinforces northern oppression while simultaneously displaying southern pride and validating that identity.

Following the establishment of racism as foundational to southern identity, the song shifts its focus from the South to the North, and the place of race within it:

> Now your northern nigger's a Negro
> You see he's got his dignity
> Down here we're too ignorant to realize
> That the North has set the nigger free

However sarcastic, these lines indicate acknowledgement from the narrator that race relations in the North and South differ. Newman is deliberate in establishing the distinction; "Negro" was the more respectful word to refer to black people in the early and mid-20th century (Kennedy 90). The narrator's tone indicates that he is critical of the distinction—how, it isn't completely clear. As a song that criticizes northern superiority, the last two lines appear disingenuous, and almost invalidate the distinction between the words used for black people in the different regions.

What follows the suspicious near-compliment of the North's attitude towards race relations is a damning litany of inequality that turns the idea of northern moral superiority on its head:

> Yes he's[6] free to be put in a cage

[6] The "he" here is referring to the African American.

In Harlem in New York City
And he's free to be put in a cage in the South-Side of Chicago
And the West-Side
And he's free to be put in a cage in Hough in Cleveland
And he's free to be put in a cage in East St. Louis
And he's free to be put in a cage in Fillmore in San Francisco
And he's free to be put in a cage in Roxbury in Boston

By including this list of ghettos in major northern cities, Newman illuminates the hypocrisy present in northern judgment of racism in the South. The North exhibits its own oppression of black people, contrary to what they may believe, and the proof is before them. However, though the bridge of the song is an obvious condemnation of northern moral superiority, Newman does not absolve the South of the racism that is prevalent there, or even indicate that racism takes on the same role between the regions. Newman does not draw a parallel between the North and the South; there is a certain truth to the freedom referenced in the phrase "free to be put in a cage." "Free," in this context, has both a genuine and sarcastic connotation; racism has a fearful role in the South, but the northern condemnation of the South is misguided, a competition of who is less racist. Perhaps black people are "more free" in the North, but what right does that grant them to be critical of southerners? Is it good enough, to be better? Newman puts the conversation in the context of moral status, without absolving either region of its contributions to racism in America.

He ends the list of ghettoized communities with: "They're gatherin' 'em up from miles around / Keepin' the niggers down." In reusing the racially-charged line previously reserved for the South, Newman again asks his audience to consider that being "less racist" is not enough to absolve the North, particularly following the righteous behavior on the part of Dick Cavett and his audience. There is, he seems to say, no moral high ground to gain from superiority that is based on a faulty foundation. This observation is not only a criticism of the

North, but indicates the suffering that arises from this superiority. Black people, in both the North and the South, will never be treated equally as long as racism is perceived as uniquely southern, and the South cannot move past the prejudice if racism is so synonymous with the identification of "southerner." Indeed, Newman does not only indicate how this perspective harms the South, but how these perceptions stagnate progress everywhere.

I refer to Newman in this section, as opposed to the narrator, because, while Newman maintains tonal consistency within the rest of the song, his own commentary is more present here, and his perspective more compelling. Newman's narrator is not necessarily absent. Through the eyes of the narrator, it is clear that he cannot see that revealing a shared racism only addresses the hypocrisy issue, and that it does not make up for or point a way toward solving the issues surrounding racial oppression. From his point of view, this list disregards the fact that the South's crimes against black Americans go beyond ghettoizing them—which the South also does it in its cities—and extend into active, collective violence against them, on both individual and institutional levels. If we observe this as purely the narrator speaking, while his points about the North may be well taken, as a defense of the South, the narrator's words ring a bit hollow.

Newman has commented on this narrative discrepancy directly: "there are some mistakes in it, like, that guy wouldn't know the names of all those ghettos, but, so what" (Hutchinson). Newman removes the distance afforded to him throughout the rest of the song by his narrator, because, as Kevin Courrier points out in his book, *Randy Newman's American Dreams*, "Newman needed [the narrator] to step out of character to provide a larger truth" (153).

Newman repeats the chorus and identifies the ways in which people view others versus the way they view themselves, showing how this hypocrisy relates to both the northerners to whom the singer is speaking and the South from which he speaks. He raises several questions: What do you do about this racist and backwards culture that didn't recover after the Civil War? How do you address the superiority of educated, more aware people? How do you get them to relate to one another? You can scold them, as Neil Young does in "Southern Man," or you can try to understand them without justifying it, which is Newman's method. Robert Christgau stated so succinctly in his brief review of the album:

> Contrary to published report, the white Southerners Newman sings about/from are never objects of contempt. Even Newman's psychotic and exhibitionist and moron show dignity and imagination, and the rednecks of the album's most notorious songs are imbued by the smart-ass Los Angeles Jew who created them with ironic distance, a smart-ass's kindest cut of all. There is, natcherly, a darker irony: no matter how smart they are about how dumb they are, they still can't think of anything better to do than keep the niggers down.

Christgau accurately explains what Newman is doing: he is giving southerners a voice and an identity, trying to illuminate the lingering effects of the divisive Civil War, Reconstruction, and Civil Rights, along with the massive injustice they have experienced at the hands of the morally self-righteous North—but he will not justify their hatred. "Rednecks" addresses northern hypocrisy and the subsequent effects on the South—racism, anti-intellectualism, etc. While the southerners can say, "We like who we are!" just as loudly as the northern crowd, it is difficult to ignore that they may have gotten the short end of the stick.

Following the opening song, Newman introduces the audience to Johnny Cutler. His presence on *Good Old Boys* utilizes consistency between the following two songs to indicate change and conflict within one character. Thus, on *Good Old Boys*, the focus of Johnny

Cutler is not necessarily his personal narrative arc but what the discrepancies between the two songs can reveal about southern identity.

In "Birmingham," Johnny Cutler introduces the listener to his humble life in Birmingham, Alabama. Birmingham was founded in 1871, during the Reconstruction Era, and grew quickly due to the iron and steel industries, as well as the railroads. It became an established industrial center in the South, with many white and black manual laborers.

Among the southern states, Alabama was one of the most resistant to the changes that accompanied the Civil Rights movement and desegregation. Birmingham was an especially contentious city in this regard and experienced significant violence. Due to the presence of the Ku Klux Klan and easy access to explosive materials, the city experienced episodes that earned it the nickname, "Bombingham." In spring of 1963, there were several protests and marches, and many adults and children were arrested, or injured by police dogs, fire hoses, and tear gas. Martin Luther King, Jr. was imprisoned following one of the demonstrations, and would draft his famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail," outlining the injustice and turmoil within the city and the country. In September of 1963, on a Sunday morning, a bomb went off at the 16th Street Baptist Church, killing four young black girls. The city became an example of the gruesome dynamics present during the Civil Rights Era, and now is home to the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, which was established in 1992.

Birmingham's history, some of which was still painfully recent at the time of *Good Old Boys*' conception, creates a dissonance between Cutler's enthusiasm for his home and the dark series of events that occurred in the city, particularly in regards to race and class divisions. In many ways, Birmingham epitomizes both the glory and folly of mid-20th century southern identity. A city built on industry—much like major northern cities—

Birmingham could not erase the deep-seated racism or working class dead ends known of the South at the time.

The song begins with a cheery, brief piano introduction. When Cutler comes in, other instruments join, creating a swell in the music. He starts off with a simple introduction of his life in Birmingham:

> Got a wife, got a family
> Earn my livin' with my hand
> I'm a roller in a steel mill
> In downtown Birmingham

These opening lines cover the basics, with Cutler presenting himself as having achieved a variation of the American Dream. He has his family and supports them with his manual labor. He is a part of Birmingham's industrial identity, a working-class man employed in a steel mill. What's more, he finds pride in this identity. Once again, Newman exposes his audience to boisterous southern pride.

After introducing himself, Cutler goes on to talk about his father:

> My daddy was a barber
> And a most unsightly man
> He was born in Tuscaloosa
> But he died right here in Birmingham

His father is a barber, which is distinct from Cutler's livelihood as a steel mill worker primarily in that it indicates vocational training.[7] Newman uses ironic humor in Cutler's description of his father, who is a barber but is himself "unsightly." This detail, though small, highlights a lack of presentation necessary in Cutler and his father's lives, which reinforces

[7] Although Newman does not expand on it here, the significance of Cutler's father as a barber may extend past the vocation. Traditionally, barbershops are considered a major hangout in the South, for blacks and whites alike. In an article about Buddy Bolden, a black trumpeter and key player in the creation of jazz, his wife said, "he did not run a scandal sheet and was not a barber, although he drank a lot and hung out in barbershops" (Marquis 5). Furthermore, on "Johnny Cutler's Birthday," there is a song titled "My Daddy Knew Dixie Howell," wherein Cutler recounts his father's relationship with the southern NFL player due to his job as a barber, which again associates a sort of social status with the job.

their image as part of the working-class. When Cutler goes on to talk about his father's birth and death places, we are given a glimpse into the grassroots mentality present. The two cities are not even sixty miles apart. By establishing Cutler's father as an authentic Alabaman, Newman gives some greater context to Cutler's own loyalty and pride in the state and his city.

The music maintains its southern Americana feel—one can picture this sunny tune being played in a parade down Main Street—as Cutler proclaims his love for Birmingham:

> Birmingham, Birmingham
> The greatest city in Alabam'
> You can travel 'cross this entire land
> But there ain't no place like Birmingham

Cutler expresses admiration for his city unambiguously in the first two lines; he is straightforward and unself-conscious. However, the following lines indicate the irony Newman intended regarding his decision to set Cutler's narrative in Birmingham. Given the recent history of the city—again, *Good Old Boys* was released just over a decade after the protests and bombings in Birmingham—Newman affords Cutler a questionable ignorance. With the racial violence fresh in Birmingham's past, Cutler's enthusiasm appears tasteless at best. Newman's use of spoken language here further reinforces the off-kilter feeling of "Birmingham." Cutler must shorten "Alabama" in order to fit it into the rhyme scheme of the song. The effect is humorous, and can come off as a colloquialism; however, it also indicates that something is off—it doesn't quite fit. Maybe it's a good thing that there isn't anywhere else like Birmingham.

As Cutler goes on talking about his humble life, Newman begins to reveal the cracks in its foundation. His introduction of his wife, Marie, solidifies the character consistency between "Birmingham" and the song that follows—simply called "Marie":

My wife's named Mary
But she's called Marie
We live in a three-room house
With a pepper tree
I work all day in the factory
That's alright with me

Cutler reveals that the life that at first seemed to be on track with the American Dream isn't quite as alluring as it seems. A three-room house is small, and this fact, followed by his comment about working all day in the factory, indicates low wages for the difficult manual labor and long hours that Cutler works. "That's alright with me" is Cutler's only indication of reflection on this particular description of his life. Although it may communicate contentment, that is hardly Newman's style; these details, along with the those about Cutler's father, indicate less contentment on his part, and more likely resignation disguised as cheap regional pride. If that is the case, it is worth considering: who is his audience? Or, rather: who is he trying to convince?

The inviting tone of the song shifts slightly when Cutler introduces his dog, Dan. The strings back off a bit, and there is a slightly menacing pause before Newman resumes singing, with the pedal-steel guitar now the most prominent instrument:

Got a big black dog
Whose name is Dan
Lives in my backyard in Birmingham
He is the meanest dog in Alabam'
Get 'em Dan

At first, Dan is introduced the same way as any other aspect of Cutler's life, matter-of-factly and at face-value. However, the final lines indicate a slightly darker, more defensive perspective from Cutler (Courrier). David and Caroline Stafford, co-writers of the Randy Newman biography *Maybe I'm Doing It Wrong*, find a connection between Dan and the dogs used by Bull Connor, Birmingham's Commissioner for Public Safety, during the Civil Rights

protests and mass arrests that took place in Birmingham during the early 1960s (109). Dan, then, is a symbol that reminds us of Birmingham's fraught racial history. Similar to the unbridled enthusiasm Cutler displays as he sings about Birmingham, it is initially unclear if Dan represents a racist mindset in Cutler himself or subtler commentary from Newman. Unfortunately, the plea for obliviousness on Cutler's part is flimsy. If his father died in Birmingham, it is likely Cutler grew up there—or at least close by—and on some level, could not turn a blind eye to the violence that took place. Even further, the final line of the verse—"Get 'em, Dan"—indicates some knowing on Cutler's part, the command undeniably hostile. Beyond Cutler's own racism, Newman seems to be remarking that Birmingham's identity cannot be divorced from its dark racial past. In what on the surface appears to be a simple song about a man's hometown is actually a presentation of two tragedies: the underwhelming, desperate life of Cutler, and the city's grim history.

Following Dan's introduction, Cutler repeats the celebratory, pro-Birmingham chorus. What before could be labeled as ambiguous appears much more ominous this second time around. Dan brings up—however subtly—Birmingham's recent racial history, and along with the realization that Cutler's life may be at some sort of dead end, the listener is left wondering what to make of Johnny Cutler.

Cutler's facade is stripped away even further in "Marie," as his struggles are less veiled. The listener is introduced to their marital problems, as well as Cutler's drinking, and realizes that, under his bombastic exterior, his experiences signify desperation.

The song opens with strings and piano, sad and deliberately sentimental to express a longing that the character struggles to articulate through words. When Cutler comes in, his voice is gentle and emotional: "You looked like a princess the night we met / With your hair

piled up high / I will never forget." The music is wistful, and Newman's voice breaks over Cutler's sweetly nostalgic lyrics. Cutler begins in the past; there is no indication of Marie now, except that this is likely not her image anymore. He is relying on a fond memory.

Cutler indicates what motivated him to come in the lines that follow:

> I'm drunk right now baby
> But I've got to be
> Or I never could tell you
> What you meant to me

Cutler gives to Marie and then he takes away; what he says is loving, but he undermines his own words when he admits to her that he couldn't do so without alcohol. In admitting that he cannot be emotionally available or affectionate without substances, Cutler shifts the song from Marie as the focus. According to Peter Winkler, Cutler's shifting focus indicates that he is "singing about himself and projecting on her. [The listener gets] no sense of Marie." "Marie" is about Cutler's own substance abuse and, as a result, his pain. It isn't important what the details of Cutler and Marie's marriage are, as Newman is not utilizing character consistency to teach us more about Cutler, but to indicate a regional pain beyond Cutler's personal life. Cutler, moments ago, was glorifying his life in the South, and now he shows us that he is disenfranchised. He does not have aspirations or opportunity, as far as we can see. He was prideful in "Birmingham" because pride is all he had, and even that, we see now, was a projection, an attempt to avoid the pain he experiences in "Marie." Newman uses Cutler to indicate the dead-end feeling perpetuated in part by the South's dismissal.

And what's more, although we may be moved to see Cutler as selfish or pathetic, we don't. This is due to the sincerity of the music underneath Cutler. As Winkler put it, "I don't think the music itself is ever ironic." Cutler's declarations of love may be self-indulgent and misguided, but the music affords him sincerity. We sympathize with Cutler, take him

seriously despite his flaws. Newman does not want us to see his transgressions as reason to write him off, but reason to attempt to understand him. Newman wants his audience to connect emotionally or sympathize with Cutler because otherwise we would likely dismiss him, while Newman wants us to consider why he is here.

After owning up to his drinking, Cutler shifts the focus back to Marie:

I loved you the first time I saw you
And I always will love you Marie
I loved you the first time I saw you
And I always will love you Marie
You're the song that the trees sing when the wind blows
You're a flower, you're a river, you're a rainbow

Here, again, Cutler is stuck in the past, calling on nostalgia. We don't doubt that he did love her that "first time." Thus, there is an implied sense of loss in him—he is less than he once was, and Marie in her current state exists to the listener, and perhaps Cutler, almost as a phantom. Cutler's own abject nostalgia evokes themes of southern pride rooted in the past. He is coping, in part with alcohol and in part with reminiscing, in order to not face his reality. Although Cutler is drinking, he does say what he feels he needs to say to Marie.[8] It feels good for him to say this, appearing to counteract whatever brought him here in the first place.

Cutler continues to shift the focus of the song from Marie to himself, torn between his intentions:

Sometimes I'm crazy
But I guess you know
And I'm weak and I'm lazy
And I've hurt you so
And I don't listen to a word you say
When you're in trouble I just turn away

[8] On "Johnny Cutler's Birthday," "Marie" follows a song called "Shining," where Marie is given a voice and reminisces about the past as well. However, unlike Cutler, she reminisces about her life before him, without him, where she was desired and free to do as she pleased.

While Cutler ultimately brings the focus back to himself, his acknowledgement of his failures and his love for Marie is not disingenuous; he is attempting some honesty. He opens up to Marie because she makes the most sense, but what brought him to do so was self-loathing and guilt. This dynamic creates a juxtaposition between the complexities of “Marie” and “Birmingham," where Cutler seemed so much more satisfied with his life. He finishes the song repeating his declarations of love for Marie over and over. This song, although it presents as a sad, forlorn love song, explores the interplay of nostalgia and guilt, and the way Cutler—much like the South—is trapped by it.

Newman quickly diverges from the Cutler narrative. He utilizes polyvocalism to explore the arc of hope fading into disenfranchisement from the perspective of an optimistic working class pleading with the president to give them a chance. While this could address many presidents who overlooked this particular group—Newman’s own description of Calvin Coolidge later on the album is in adherence with the following song—the most obvious subject is none other than Richard Nixon.

During Richard Nixon’s first successful bid for President of the United States, his campaign employed the “Southern Strategy.” The idea was to exploit white Southerners’ general racism and distaste for civil rights legislation in order to sway the traditionally Democratic-leaning voters to vote for the Republican candidate (Green). Nixon was elected President in 1968, with 301 electoral votes. Four years later, in 1972, he won reelection with 520 electoral votes (DeGregorio 589-591). Two years after his reelection, the Watergate Scandal broke, followed swiftly by his resignation—August 9th, 1974—to avoid impeachment (598). “Mr. President (Have Pity On The Working Man)” was recorded the same day.

Although not obviously a Watergate-era album, *Good Old Boys* is almost exactly contemporaneous with those events. Perhaps partly because of this, politics play a major role on the album, and Newman's critique of Richard Nixon in "Mr. President (Have Pity On The Working Man)" is straightforward, strategically repetitive and simple. Newman's narrators are trying to be positive, but have misgivings that they cannot ignore; the upbeat intentions of the song are undercut by a conspicuously lethargic tempo—unlike the defiantly robust chorus of "Rednecks," there is a slight shifting down of gears despite its attempt to swing: "We've taken all you've given / But it's gettin' hard to make a livin' / Mr. President have pity on the working man." Newman establishes the "we" as working-class Americans. These first two lines imply a tentative trust on the part of the workers; they have not yet given up on Nixon. The tone at this point is concerned, but respectful; the group maintains loyalty to Nixon—they voted for him, so they want to believe in him. Perhaps the men are more aware than they seem, but still they do not want to give up on him, because giving up on Nixon would be an admission that they have no power.

The following lines expand on this theme, while maintaining the agreeable, pleading tone, as the men relay their simple message that they want a fighting chance: "We ain't asking for you to love us / You may place yourself high above us / Mr. President have pity on the working man." The working-class men give Nixon permission to feel superior and to not care; they are not demanding justice, just the chance to sustain themselves instead of descending into poverty. The song mirrors the disenfranchisement born of being let down that both Cutler and Marie experienced—Cutler let down by his lacking opportunity and prospects, Marie let down, in turn, by Cutler. However, because Nixon is powerful where Cutler is not, there is something especially horrible about the president not coming through;

this introduces the idea of expendability or worthlessness as characteristic of the working class.

During the succeeding lines, the music changes, drawing focus and acting as a sort of bridge for the brief song. The message does not vary much as the song carries on, but the workers continue on as if they just need to clarify their message to Nixon—then he would understand and advocate for them: "I know it may sound funny / But people ev'ry where are runnin' out of money / We just can't make it by ourself." The first two lines of this verse play into the same forgiving strategy previously implemented in the song. Mentioning "people ev'ry where" emphasizes that it is not necessarily regional, and though the people singing may experience less representation, they are a sizable group. The following line—"We just can't make it by ourself"—directly states the goal of the workers in reaching out to Nixon: they need the government's support, otherwise their lives are not sustainable. They continue to repeat their message because they do not want to admit that they have been forsaken.

"Mr. President (Have Pity On The Working Man)" repeats the same ideas with slightly different wordings and methods of appeal, as if hitting it just right will be all they need to convince him: "It is cold and the wind is blowing / We need something to keep us going / Mr. President have pity on the working man." Newman employs an image of bad weather to indicate the "out of our hands" dynamic for the working men. It is not an issue of laziness or effort, but that, as working-class people, they are at the mercy of those who control the economic systems.

A musical interlude follows. It is complacent and happy, with bright horns—the music does not indicate the criticisms or stakes displayed in the song. Following this interlude, the familiar musical pattern returns, but the lyrics display a distinct tonal shift:

Maybe you're cheatin'
Maybe you're lyin'
Maybe you have lost your mind
Maybe you're only thinking 'bout yourself

The workers are hostile now, although the music maintains the same pleasant mood. There is still a benefit of the doubt with the "maybe" that begins each line, but the accusations maintain their weight. These words are more heated than the other explanations for Nixon's apathy in the song. This is the point when the workers shift from their position of tentative hope in Nixon to open disenfranchisement. Once again, southerners are being disappointed and exploited for larger pursuits. This is a defeat, when defeat is what drove these working-class men to vote for Nixon. Newman is not only commenting on the abandonment often experienced by the working-class at the hands of politicians, but the way that Nixon and his administration only paid attention to the South in order to secure a win, exploiting and diminishing the region. This leads to disenfranchisement on the part of the southerners, and alienates them further. They realize that their expectations have been misplaced in him—he will not prioritize them.

The final verse shifts away from both the agreeable and hostile tones, instead expressing resignation to their situation:

Too late to run. Too late to cry now
The time has come for us to say good-bye now
Mr. President have pity on the working man
Mr. President have pity on the working man

The men state the stakes of the situation at the end. They admit that there isn't much they can do, and pitying themselves is not really an option. The second line could either imply needing to find a new line of work (not likely), or saying goodbye to Nixon, but there is little significance in that. He already holds a position of power, and the power dynamic at play is

only highlighted by the fact that all the workers have is their words, which will not change his mind. Their disenfranchisement leads to resignation, a theme that permeates *Good Old Boys*—the dwindling expectations of southerners standing as a particularly affecting theme on the album.

Side One ends with "Guilty," another personal narrative exploring substance abuse and the pain beneath it. The song begins with simple piano, accompanied by winds as the narrator comes in: "Yes, baby, I been drinkin'." The narrator's use of the word "baby" indicates that he is speaking to his love interest, and the wording—casual, like he's answering a question with that "yes"—acknowledges his habitual alcohol abuse. This declaration is not playful; in this first line, it is clear that we have moved far from the somewhat triumphant narrative present at the beginning of the album. Newman has identified substance abuse and drinking as a vehicle to explore regional pain previously on the record, and utilizes the repetition of vices over the course of the album in order to indicate a sort of helplessness or nakedness, as well as perpetual bad habits. Newman is not just identifying drinking as a staple of southern life, although he is doing that; he is using it as an entrance into the pain that is at its source.

The narrator rolls out another confession in the following line: "And I shouldn't come by I know." These opening lines are casual and conversational, but they reveal complex pain. The narrator is reaching out, despite acknowledging that it isn't in anyone's best interests. There is a connection between his drinking and this impulsive decision, both fueled by pain, and the results from his actions will likely cause more pain. Like "Marie," "Guilty" is not a song about the listener, but about the speaker, where Newman offers yet another confessional song that the singer needs more than anybody else.

After his initial confessions, the narrator reveals his motivations: “But I found myself in trouble, darlin’ / And I had nowhere else to go.” Newman is exploring desperation through his narrator’s mistakes. On a more literal level, we can deduce that it is likely the habits we have already seen that brought him here. However, Newman’s intentions are not just to evoke sympathy for this man, but to make a greater point. Again, he is referencing nostalgia, using it as a tool to indicate disenfranchisement in the narrator’s current state.

Following the introduction, the narrator reveals his harmful coping strategies: “Got some whisky from the barman / Got some cocaine from a friend.” If the reference to drinking in the first line wasn’t enough of an indication, here the narrator confesses to further substance abuse. The progression from a legal substance in a controlled environment to an illegal drug in an informal environment indicates a level of severity and desperation; Newman is upping the ante. The narrator maintains his structure, and after this most recent confession, appeals to sweeter inclinations: “I just had to keep on movin’ / Til I was back in your arms again.” He is seeking comfort.

Side One ends with another close look at a southerner’s relationship with substance abuse and the implications that arise. “Guilty” is not only an exploration of the narrator’s pain, but disenfranchisement, not only with his life, but with himself. Newman explores the loss of dignity in southern identity, and the role of blame within it, in the final song on Side One. Although he may “keep on movin’,” it isn’t perseverance that pushes him; this is not a song about overcoming, but avoidance.

Finally, we encounter the song’s title, the fundamental confession: “I’m guilty, baby I’m guilty / And I’ll be guilty all the rest of my life.” While poignant and condemning, this is deliberately left open-ended. The “baby” in the first line indicates, again, the familiarity,

which implies that he's said, thought, or felt this way before, and that this behavior is indicative of a cyclical pattern. Over the course of Side One, Newman identifies pain as a pillar of southern identity. He is saying that the disenfranchisement they experience—political, financial, social, etc.—results in a lasting pain, one that appears inescapable and leads its victims to harmful coping methods. He is not saying that they are blameless, but he is saying that they are forsaken, working-class people from an invalidated region, their regional identity synonymous with prejudice and defeat. Of course Newman's narrator cannot be comfortable with himself when his identity carries with it so many implications of failure.

The lines that follow only cement this reading further. There isn't any indication that the narrator cares who he's talking to anymore: "How come I never do what I'm supposed to do / How come nothin' that I try to do ever turns out right?" Newman captures the end-of-the-line quality of the late night that lets in the ghosts of regret. Whether the narrator is lamenting about the way he treats his significant other, his substance abuse, his job, he appears incapable of helping himself.

It seems that this behavior results from a lack of expectations, of standards, of faith that he needs to do better or even can. Following the preceding songs on Side One, this narrator represents a nameless southerner with a problem with alcohol and self-control, likely low income, who feels let down by his leaders—more bricks in his wall of misery and banality.

The next line directly addresses the familiarity touched on throughout the song: "You know, you know how it is with me baby / You know, you know I just can't stand myself." His self-loathing is laid bare, starkly fessed up to. And, again, it is due to his deep feelings of

inadequacy: “And it takes a whole lot of medicine / For me to pretend that I’m somebody else.” Again, the narrator addresses his alcoholism, but this time the implications are greater. These lines appear to cast off the status of a poor white southerner, an opposite sentiment to that expressed in “Rednecks.” Side One shows the progression of misplaced pride in the face of oppression to the brutal realization of all the implications that the status of a “redneck” carries. Although the album begins in opposition to northern hypocrisy, Side One ends with distinct hopelessness in the face of all that that implies. Side One shows the unraveling of the redneck. In all of the observations that Newman makes about southern identity, we see the results in “Guilty.” The results are a people so disenfranchised by their world, beaten down with an identity that only seems to carry a negative connotation. They may be able to yell about the pros of being a redneck, but when faced with the reality of this identity, they crumble. In presenting to his audience regional and personal pain, Newman illustrates that these are interconnected in southern identity. By placing “Guilty” at the end of Side One, he implicates the rest of the U.S. in fueling this pain. He also implores us to pity the narrator, to relate with him, and grants him a shred of humanity as he hits rock bottom.

SIDE TWO

On Side Two of *Good Old Boys*, Newman departs from the contemporary Birmingham that provided Side One's setting—which was a vestige of the aborted "Johnny Cutler" project—and expands the album's scope both temporally and culturally as he continues to explore aspects and emblems of southern identity. Side Two reaches into the South's past and crosses state lines to create a broader, more historical picture of a whole region. It also expands the tonal palette of the record: whereas Side One filtered a relatively conventional blue-collar existence through a subtle irony, Side Two ventures into broad comedy and absurdity. Where Side One was a deconstruction of the "redneck" in order to get to the root of that identity, Side Two utilizes history and grotesquerie, as opposed to the more personal feel of Side One, to further explore southern identity.

Newman composes a lament of the South and its place in America by opening Side Two with "Louisiana 1927," which suddenly transports the listener in time from the more contemporary Side One. This somber epic revisits the devastating Mississippi River floods that plagued the South beginning in 1926 and extending, catastrophically, into 1927. This natural disaster stands out as the worst recorded river flooding that the United States had—and has—ever experienced. 27,000 square miles were inundated up to a depth of thirty feet, most severely impacting Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana. The floods would ultimately displace over 500,000 people and take the lives of nearly 500. The damages were estimated to be one billion dollars—one third of the federal budget in 1927.

The forces behind this disaster were not only natural; they were, in at least one tragic case, human-caused and politically motivated. In early April of 1927, fifteen inches of rain fell in New Orleans in eighteen hours. Those in authority shielded the public from the

growing threat as they attempted to devise a plan to protect New Orleans: "Publicly, every person in authority in New Orleans proclaimed absolute confidence. So did the newspapers" (Barry 187). However, the storm generated growing concern among the higher-ups. A group of politicians and prominent Louisiana bankers deliberated for weeks over whether or not to dynamite the levees south of New Orleans, flooding the St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parishes—which were home to many poor and working-class people—in order to minimize overall damage to the city. Once the decision was made, plans were set in place, and on April 15th, the levees were blown—without legal permission. The following day, "the Glasscock levee on the west bank of the Mississippi gave way, easing pressure on New Orleans levees...the destruction of St. Bernard and Plaquemines was unnecessary. One day's wait would have shown it to be so" (Barry 258).

Newman's "Louisiana 1927" addresses the flood through a near god's-eye-view of its ominous progress and destruction that, on the surface, possesses an almost aloof quality. He uses the same chord progression as his gut-wrenching "Sail Away" from two years earlier.[9] "Louisiana 1927" also has musical roots in "Song Of The South," the film score from *The River*, and the traditional American folk song "Shenandoah." Perhaps the most significant musical connection, however, is "Old Man River" from the musical *Showboat* (1936). Newman incorporated the song's less famous eight bars from its introduction into the "Louisiana 1927" introduction (Kastin 1079).[10] All of these songs come together to ground "Louisiana 1927" in the American southern musical tradition.

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[9] Stephen Davis noted that the musical connection between these two songs went beyond recycling a tune in his *Rolling Stone* review of the record: "'Louisiana 1927' revives the southern motif in a melodic reprise of 'Sail Away' updated 200 years. Now the South is wrecked and shamed in this song as if, Newman implies by reusing the 'Sail' theme, in retribution for the sins of its fathers."

[10] At the beginning of "Ol' Man River," over the music that Newman based the "Louisiana 1927" opening on, the lyrics are: "There's an ol' man called the Mississippi / That's the ol' man that I'd like to be / What does he

"Louisiana 1927" opens with full strings gliding over the chords pulled from "Ol' Man River." The strings are warm, and the traditional foundation of the music results in a sound that is nostalgic and distinctly southern. As the narrator comes in, the strings give way to a piano and simple drums. The tempo is slow, and the melody grows as instruments join back in over the course of the song.

The narrator begins by orienting the listener: "What has happened down here is the winds have changed / Clouds roll in from the north and it started to rain." The narrator is straightforward, distinctly unemotional as he relays an understated description of the storm. However, Newman utilizes subtlety within this directness. The second line indicates a deeper meaning when the narrator notes that the "Clouds roll in from the north." By pointing out the North as the origin of the storm, Newman reinforces the division between the two regions, and emphasizes the reality that the South was battered by the storm as the rest of the country looked on. There are obvious echoes of the trauma suffered by the South at the hands of the Army of the Potomac. Newman commented on the lyric in an interview with Timothy White, "The storm comes from the North...There's a feeling down there, definitely, of anti-Yankee animus toward the North, toward government, toward people trying to tell them what to do" (18). Although the storm and subsequent flooding was a natural disaster, the line cultivates the sense of regional division present on the album, and distinguishes the South as the isolated victim of the disaster.

The narrator's first description of the rain is matter-of-fact, but gains intensity in the lines that follow: "Rained real hard and it rained for a real long time / Six feet of water in the streets of Evangeline." Newman utilizes sober facts to evoke the severity of the storm as the

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care if the world's got trouble / What does he care if the land ain't free?"

narrator continues to calmly describe the horrible events, bringing his focus to the people. Although the simple melody is maintained, the music grows as more instruments join in:

> The river rose all day
> The river rose all night
> Some people got lost in the flood
> Some people got away alright

Newman affords the narrator a lack of sentimentality to allow the terrible facts to speak for themselves. This mode of storytelling also reflects resignation on the part of the South, not just because the events have already transpired, but that there was a certain fulfillment of expectations that they would not receive help, indicated by the South's distrust of the North alluded to earlier in the song.

The narrator begins to address the human influence on the destruction when he brings up Plaquemines Parish: "The river have busted through clear down to Plaquemines / Six feet of water in the streets of Evangeline." Newman uses the word "busted" to evoke the dynamite explosions, referencing the decision on the part of Louisiana politicians and higher-ups to demolish the levees south of New Orleans. By referencing Plaquemines, Newman's narrator addresses the destruction that was brought to these areas by the blowing of the levee, as opposed to the floods alone. In repeating the line, "Six feet of water in the streets of Evangeline," Newman implicates the politicians who made this decision as parallel with the natural disaster.

The music, which has continued to grow in intensity as instruments gradually joined in throughout the verses, is full and powerful entering the chorus. The instruments crescendo a beat following the narrator's emotional declaration:

> Louisiana, Louisiana
> They're tryin' to wash us away
> They're tryin' to wash us away

Louisiana, Louisiana
They're tryin' to wash us away
They're tryin' to wash us away

The narrator and the others who have been displaced recognize the implications of the elite's actions: those who have been displaced are expendable, worthless, and unnecessary. Following the devastation, many of those affected did not receive the meager reimbursement they had been promised, despite their homes and livelihoods being taken from them (Barry 351). The refrain of "They're tryin' to wash us away" indicates the betrayal felt toward leaders who should have protected them. But this betrayal is perhaps even more significant than previous betrayals, such as those from Nixon in "Mr. President (Have Pity On The Working Man)." The chain of decisions on the part of Louisiana's powerful illuminates more than unfortunate consequences: it shows southerners being betrayed by other southerners. Perhaps the storm was unavoidable, but the apathy of the constituents sworn to protect all of their citizens is not. This diverse population of southerners is not just neglected by the rest of the country, but by "their own," deepening the huge chasm between the poor southerners and established southerners, and only the poor ones carry the load of the fraught identity and subsequent derision by the North.

Following the emotional chorus, the narrator continues to describe the series of events, back to simple facts. Newman brings President Calvin Coolidge down to view the destruction:

President Coolidge came down in a railroad train
With a little fat man with a note-pad in his hand
The President say, "Little fat man isn't it a shame
What the river has done
To this poor cracker's land."

Following the narrator's assessment of failure by local jurisdictions to protect the people, Coolidge's fictional visit to view the devastation is an indictment of the national failure to protect the people, and magnifies the role of the federal government that has been alluded to up to this point in the song.[11] Coolidge, unaffected by the storms himself, has the luxury to "come down in a railroad train" and calculate the damage after it is done. He is also accompanied by the press, suggesting that his appearance is at least partly motivated by an opportunity for good publicity.[12] Although there is some humor in the "little fat man," that humor is almost inappropriate, as their exchange indicates a lack of empathy on their parts for the victims. The understatement of the President's reaction—"isn't it a shame"—indicates how little he really cares. The irony drips from Coolidge's reaction as he blames the river for the extent of the damage in the face of his own inaction, effectively absolving himself, as well as those who made the decision to blow up the levees. What's more, Coolidge diminishes those affected—who look to him to lend the strong support of a caring leader—by calling them "crackers." By using the phrase "cracker," a word defined by the *Dictionary of American Regional English*, as "a poor White person," he deems the affected delta practically worthless, and its inhabitants dispensable. The slur instantly invalidates their identity as Americans; their suffering is real, but their needs as second-class citizens don't deserve much consideration.

The song ends with the narrator repeating the line, "They're tryin' to wash us away" four times. In many ways, "Louisiana 1927" is the heart of the album, a historic event that

[11] Coolidge was beyond ineffective during and after the floods. As governors pleaded with Coolidge for federal assistance, he didn't act (Barry 240). He continuously declined to visit the affected regions, despite the impact that his visits would have (287). Following the floods, members of Congress pleaded with Coolidge to call a special session to deal with the devastation. Coolidge declined (372).

[12] The presence of a reporter could also suggest that the narrator's oddly detached descriptions of the flood might be meant to reflect the press's coolly professional perspective on the tragic events.

justifies southern disenfranchisement with the rest of the country and a feeling of worthlessness. The song is not only effective in its compassionate retelling of a major trauma for the South, but as a more universal understanding of the plight of second-class citizens in America. It is the absolute failure on the part of an entire system, from the local to national scale. The devastation to the South as a result of natural disaster and national apathy revealed not only the second-class status of working class whites and black people, but also the harsh reality that resulted from these perceptions. The trauma of the Mississippi River floods persisted for years. Many of the displaced people migrated to the North and Midwest. Louisiana's working class was downtrodden and the city of New Orleans never recovered. Newman uses this historical event not to only retell history, but to relate it to social and political dynamics he identified as still present as the time of *Good Old Boys*' release.

Huey P. Long, a man of modest beginnings who eventually became a lawyer and public service commissioner, saw the floods and subsequent events as an opportunity to establish himself politically. Long recognized the discontent of the people from the St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parishes and, with their support, in 1928—the year following the flood—ran for and was elected governor of Louisiana (Barry 408). Long successfully tapped into not only the desperation but the lingering defiance and mistrust on the part of the working-class encapsulated in Newman's line, "They're trying to wash us away."

Long was governor of Louisiana from 1928-1932. Nicknamed (by himself) as the "Kingfish"—likely influenced by the radio show *Amos 'n' Andy*—Long painted himself not as a typical politician, but an advocate for the working man (Kennedy, 130).[13] In his

[13] *Amos 'n' Andy* was a radio show, started in 1928 by "two white men with roots in minstrelsy," that followed "the misadventures of a group of blacks living and working in Harlem" (Kennedy, 129). It was an exceptionally popular radio show that, when it made its transition to television, adopted an all-black cast that "superseded the white men who had previously supplied the voices of the black characters" (Kennedy, 130).

campaign song, "Every Man A King," which Long co-wrote with New Orleans jazz orchestra composer and director of the LSU band, Castro Carazo, he boisterously declares that everyone can have anything they could ever want—if they vote for him, of course (Frazier, 37). Newman included the song on *Good Old Boys* as a brief segue between the heartbreaking "Louisiana 1927" and Long-inspired "Kingfish":

> Why weep or slumber America
> Land of brave and true
> With castles and clothing and food for all
> All belongs to you
> Ev'ry man a king, ev'ry man a king
> For you can be a millionaire
> If there's something belonging to others
> There's enough for all people to share
> When it's sunny June and December too
> Or in the winter time or spring
> There'll be peace without end
> Ev'ry neighbor a friend
> And ev'ry man a king

Long's campaign was in direct response to the way people were forsaken during and after the 1927 floods, and the campaign song is no exception. Although the vision of America that Long presents is unrealistic, if not completely unattainable, "Every Man A King" is refreshing in its enthusiasm. Long promised that people would have a fighting chance, empowering those who had been beaten down by their harsh reality, and presented himself as a symbol of opportunity for those who had lost so much to the floods. However, his own agenda remained under the surface of his advocacy for the working-class. In including the campaign song, Newman introduces the listener to Long's "utopia" through his own words before going on to "Kingfish."

Following his election, Long established himself as one of the, if not *the*, most powerful governors America had ever seen. In his efforts to "lift up" the poor and working

class whites, Long implemented substantial infrastructural, social, and educational programs. He also advocated for African Americans, establishing education systems and eliminating voting restrictions. He capitalized on the working-class' skepticism of government and institutions, and "[in] time, the legislature, the state bureaucracy, the courts, even local governments fell firmly under his control" ("Huey Long"). However, Long was met with several challenges. The South was firmly in the Jim Crow era at the time of his governorship, and his call for the redistribution of wealth did not sit well with his establishment opponents and big corporations. "In 1929, Standard Oil's legislative allies lied an unsuccessful attempt to remove Huey Long from the governorship" due to the taxes he imposed on refined oil to fund his programs (Long Legacy Project). To some, Long was a demagogue who manipulated the emotions and frustrations of people—his followers were largely the rural poor—to obtain power. To others, he was a reformer who implemented important programs and delivered positive change to the state of Louisiana. A controversial political figure, Long symbolized both advocacy for and exploitation of the poor he claimed to serve.

"Kingfish," following the triumphant "Every Man A King," is eerie, to say the least. The musical contrast between the two songs is unsettling; where "Every Man A King" is simple, loud, and celebratory, "Kingfish" is ominous, beginning with a lilting, discordant piano introduction. The juxtaposition of the songs simulates the listener going past the rousing public message to hear the backroom pitch. It appears that the narrator is, once again, the Kingfish himself—these two songs are the only points on the album where the narrator speaks from a place of power. As Long fluctuates between his reputations and messages throughout the song, the listener is cast into the role of constituent.

The fictional Long begins by casting suspicion on the "Frenchmen" of New Orleans:

There's a hundred-thousand Frenchmen in New Orleans
In New Orleans there are Frenchmen everywhere
But your house could fall down
Your baby could drown
Wouldn't none of those Frenchmen care

Long was known for pitting his working-class white and black supporters against other groups motivated by his own agenda. Here, he states that the "Frenchmen"—likely referring to the French-speaking population in New Orleans—aren't concerned with the plights of his working-class audience. He also utilizes flood imagery—"your house could fall down / Your baby could drown." Newman and Long include these images motivated by different intentions; where Long wants to dredge up the flood imagery to exploit the suffering of a group to maintain support, Newman does so to highlight the double-dealing nature of Long's tactics. Long uses the images and the Frenchmen's apathy to set up sides, with himself of the side of the working class.

Long continues, shifting from the "Frenchmen" to address his supporters more directly: "Everybody gather 'round / Loosen up your suspenders / Hunker down on the ground." Here, Long's attempts to appear approachable read as political strategy. He encourages his audience to "loosen up" their suspenders and sit down on the ground—presumably with him—to indicate that there are no barriers: he is on their level. Long then goes even further to identify with the group: "I'm a cracker / And you are too."

Long wasn't exactly a cracker. Though he came from humble beginnings, he worked his way up, and by the time he was addressing the working-class people from St. Bernard and Plaquemines, he had all but left that side of himself behind. Although "cracker" has roots that far precede their American meaning, the word developed a specific identity in the South.[14]

[14] "Cracker" appears in a line in Shakespeare's *King John*: "What cracker is this same that deafs our ears with this abundance of superfluous breath?" Early use of the term was as an admonishment of braggarts, particularly

This new identity was as a racial slur toward white southerners, identifying them as poor and bigoted (Demby). However, over the course of the 20th century, it developed a second identity as "a label of ethnic and regional pride" (Burrison). But, like many regional and racial slurs, "cracker" could not completely divorce itself from the more negative connotations.

Newman uses "cracker" very differently in "Kingfish" than he does in "Louisiana 1927." When Coolidge utters the word, it diminishes those affected by the devastation as a lower-class and distinguishes them as not worth his trouble. Long uses "cracker" not to diminish, but to achieve a sort of understanding with his white, working-class constituents. Though it is unclear whether Long truly identifies as a cracker, his use establishes the word as a badge of honor, an attempt to differentiate himself from other politicians and relate to the "little guys" that he so prominently advocates for. In including the word in these parallel contexts—both spoken by politicians in positions of power—Newman reinforces the condescension and status of the white working class in both contexts.

After Long establishes himself as a cracker, he asks: "But don't I take good care of you?" The "But" seems to acknowledge that the status of "cracker" is a weak one, one that does not hold much power. He acknowledges that, historically, the classification has not held much status, but implies that he and his constituents are defiantly pushing against that classification.

As previously mentioned, Long was known for his ego—after all, he was the Kingfish. The song moves from the unsettling tone to much more uplifting one as Long shifts from his manipulative tone to boasting his own successes:

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toward those from Scotland and Ireland. When these groups settled in what would become a part of the American South, the word followed them, and gradually developed to describe "rural, non-elite white southerners" (Burrison).

Who built the highway to Baton Rouge?
Who put up the hospital and built your schools?
Who looks after shit-kickers like you?
The Kingfish do

Again, Newman highlights at once what was revolutionary and controversial about Long. He was effective and powerful, and he made good on many of his promises to the lower- and working-class. Although Long was a sort of advocate for the working class, his assuming the role of "cracker" was more strategic than genuine. Long was *powerful*, and as indicated earlier, the status of "cracker" was not. Newman indicates this with the final two lines, in which Long identifies his audience as "shit-kickers" before referring to himself as "the Kingfish." While Long may identify as a "cracker," he notably does not identify with "shit-kicker," defined by the *Dictionary of American Regional English* as another word for "redneck." There is still a hierarchy, and Long will not take on all of the implications of being part of the southern working class. In establishing Long above them, Newman places Long in a similar position to Nixon and Coolidge. While Long's presentation on the album is not necessarily as damning as the other politicians, the power imbalance is still present, and Long is fully aware.

Newman utilizes Long's inconsistencies in the song as well, flipping back to Long identifying with the working crowd directly after distinguishing himself:

Who gave a party at the Roosevelt Hotel?
And invited the whole north half of the state down there for free
The people in the city
Had their eyes bugging out
Cause everyone looked just like me

Long was known for staying at the Roosevelt Hotel whenever he was in New Orleans. Here, he is playing up the populism that results from his advocating for the little guy. Although Long was like a fish in water at the hotel—unlike his constituents—what he is indicating is a

sort of revolution of the working class, owning the status and challenging the hierarchy already set in place. He also does not forget to credit himself for this.

As Long presents his ego once more, the music goes back to the dissonant minor chords, portraying Long's duplicitous nature:

> Here comes the Kingfish, the Kingfish
> Everybody sing
> Here's the Kingfish, the Kingfish
> Every man a king

Both the music and Long's ego indicate ulterior motives under his advocate exterior. Newman places Long's own words in his mouth here, ironic with a distinctly sinister tone compared to his campaign song. Though Newman comments extensively on Long's ego and need for power, he does not necessarily undermine him. Long is distinct from other politicians on the album, not only in that we are presented with his perspective, but also because of his efforts to validate southern identity.

The music shifts back to a major key as Long brings up his attacks on big business:

> Who took on the Standard Oil men
> And whipped their ass
> Just like he promised he'd do?
> Ain't no Standard Oil men gonna run this state
> Gonna be run by little folks like me and you

Long did in fact challenge Standard Oil, and cut taxes to benefit the poor and working class, a risky move that almost resulted in his impeachment. The irony here, of course, is in the final line. Long is distinctly not a "little folk." Over the course of the song, he has fluctuated between identifying with his voter base—the working class—and bragging about his power.

The song ends on Long's ego:

> Here's the Kingfish, the Kingfish
> Friend of the working man
> The Kingfish, the Kingfish

The Kingfish gonna save this land

This time, Long is not the working man but the "friend of," and he alone will restore Louisiana. The first three songs on Side Two of *Good Old Boys* indicate the diminished status of the working class and emphasize that they were treated as expendable in the aftermath of the floods and exploited in their discontent. This, following "Mr. President (Have Pity On The Working Man)" and Coolidge's "Louisiana 1927" cameo, goes on to solidify the problematic role of politics in the South during the 20th century. Newman is remarking on powerlessness, being jerked around, and being diminished in your identity. He is clearly critical of the exploitation and the power exercised over a vulnerable and traumatized population; in the Louisiana section of the album, Newman uses history to bring attention to the past as well as emphasize that these power dynamics are still happening. His goal isn't merely to ruminate but to observe how these events have shaped the South, and what that says about the division and state of the country. Although Long may validate southern experience, the working class he represents are never in power.

Newman deviates from the distinctly historical opening of Side Two and descends into the absurd in the following three songs. He uses personae to explore not historical evolution or political dynamics, but his characters' personal experiences in an indefinite commentary on southern identity. In the following, Newman utilizes polyvocality to explore themes outside the confines of coherent narrative structure. The songs do not tie together or harken back to previous songs on the album, and the themes and ideas are less straightforward. Here, Newman utilizes three distinct personae and their strange stories to indicate the humorous absurdity and poignancy of these seemingly random people's lives. Newman presents these disjointed narratives as both an exploration of the strangeness of

human beings—in this case, southern human beings—and as an opportunity to afford some humanity to these people despite the absurdity of their stories through the interplay of music and lyric and insight into the characters' perspectives. These narratives highlight struggle in stranger contexts perhaps to bring focus to their humanity, while allowing the humor to propel the album forward. It is easy to sympathize with those directly harmed by natural disaster or forsaken by politicians, but Newman is attempting to make a commentary on identity; these narratives, not so linked to tangible inequities, implore Newman's audience to focus on the people, rather than political commentary or class divides.

The first of these narratives is "Naked Man," a story of an old woman lost in a city who is robbed by the Naked Man. It is unclear where we are; we are in a city, and Newman describes the cold, cold night:

> Old lady lost in the city
> In the middle of a cold, cold night
> It was fourteen below and the wind start to blow
> There wasn't a boy scout in sight
> Pull down the shades cause he's comin'
> Turn out the lights cause he's here
> Runnin' hard down the street
> Through the snow and the sleet
> On the coldest night of the year

This song is not so infused or direct with indictments as others we have seen up to this point. The cold is intended to heighten the absurdity of the fact that the Naked Man is not dressed. Newman seems to be playing with an "urban legend" idea, strange stories people tell each other in close communities. He follows this description with: "Beware, beware, beware of the Naked Man." Newman uses humor to establish the atmosphere of the story, making it more compelling as it continues.

Before the Naked Man steals the old woman's purse, he says:

"They found out about my sister
And kicked me out of the Navy,
They would have strung me up if they could.
I tried to explain that we were both of us lazy
And were doing the best we could."

As is customary of Newman in his more narrative songs, he utilizes suspense before leaning into the crux of the story. When the Naked Man confesses his transgressions to the old woman, we are finally given context for what was previously a strange, humorous, but random story. It is implied that the Naked Man is guilty of incest with his sister; if so, this indicates the conspicuous turn to not only the absurd but the grotesque on Side Two of the album. Now we are in a territory of transgressions, and Newman is utilizing humor to trick the listener into letting his guard down. The Naked Man is guilty of crimes both moral and legal, and there is an indication of inevitability and resignation, when he says, "I tried to explain that we were both us lazy / And we were doing the best we could." Although the humor of the song does not diminish—that the Naked Man commits incest out of laziness is precisely the dark humor we expect from Newman—the final line exposes a pathetic existence, and introduces relatability into a story that was, up to this point, absurd.

After he steals the woman's purse, the Naked Man runs off into the night, saying:

"Someone stop me," he cried,
As he faded from sight,
"Won't nobody help a naked man?"
"Won't nobody help a naked man?"

Maybe this is a comment on the inevitability of it all; it wasn't his choice to live this way. The Naked Man could be a victim of his upbringing, in a liminal southern household of rednecks who lost their mental and social compass long ago, and are just surviving against the odds. "Naked Man" juxtaposes humor and blurred lines of morality with a deeper sadness to implicate the listener to ultimately still feel bad for him. Despite his stealing, his incest,

and his nudity, the ultimate emotion Newman evokes from his listener is pity. This is partly due to his sardonic storytelling, but it also reveals Newman's compassion for misfits. The "Naked Man" might have great metaphorical meaning, he might not. But the story is painful, and with what little information Newman gives us, it is a testament to how life can strip a man bare of all dignity, comfort, and sense of belonging.

In "A Wedding In Cherokee County," Newman again presents characters whom conventional society would consider misfits. We've wandered into the woods, so to speak, but there are *people* here. The song uses humor as well, and is told from the perspective of a man marrying a woman who appears to be completely incapacitated.

Whereas on the previous song, Newman opted for an upbeat arrangement that perfectly complemented its outlandish story, Newman takes a different tack here. At least as strange as its predecessor—and also in a comic vein (indeed, the song ends with a sort of punchline)—the pathetic "Cherokee County" nonetheless requires a different approach. The music here is lovely and earnest, slow as a wedding march. This seems to validate the narrator's feelings—much like the delicate music of "Marie" reinforced its tender sentiments—despite the bizarre story that unfolds. His feelings are legitimate, even if we occasionally want to laugh at the existence he describes. The song opens with a pretty piano intro before the narrator introduces us to his bride-to-be. Any hope of normalcy vanishes quickly, as the song takes a turn for the backwoods absurd:

> There she is sitting there
> Out behind the smoke-house in her rocking chair
> She don't say nothin'
> She don't do nothin'
> She don't feel nothin'
> She don't know nothin'
> Maybe she's crazy, I don't know
> Maybe that's why I love her so

Although the listener may wonder what this wife-to-be could possibly bring to the table, the narrator is smitten. Even if Newman is not a misanthrope—a legitimate consideration with an artist whose vision is so dark—we can safely say he is not sentimentalizing these strange people through the lens of a love story. He's not a miniaturist concocting a charming tableau, and he does not mean the union in "A Wedding in Cherokee County" to be cute. If anything, we are pushed away, as the narrator follows that unforgettable image of his fiancée sitting catatonic behind the smokehouse with further strangeness that is borderline-menacing. The absurdity only increases as he moves onto her family: "Her papa was a midget / Her mama was a whore / Her grandad was a newsboy 'til he was eighty-four."

We go on to realize that the bride-to-be is not the blank slate she appeared at first but has feelings—namely a murderous hostility towards the narrator who loves her so much:

> Man don't you think I know she hates me
> Man don't you think I know that she's no good
> If she knew how she'd be unfaithful to me
> I think she'd kill me if she could
> Maybe she's crazy I don't know
> Maybe that's why I love her so

This is surely pitiful: a man recognizes hatred on the part of his mate, and follows this by claiming his undeniable love for her. He is not simply settling, but seems content with having anything at all. Maybe what his fiancée gives him, in addition to a warm body to lie beside, is recognition. That was where Long gained his power, what the rednecks want when they proclaim their status. However malicious her feelings may be, she *sees* him. Somehow, he gets strength from her:

> I'm not afraid of the Greywolf
> Who stalks through our forest at dawn
> As long as I have her beside me
> I have the strength to carry on

The "Greywolf" is partly what it appears to be at first glance—a predator stalking these vulnerable, rural people in the night—but it is obviously something more, something dark and metaphorical. It represents any threat from outside, but also the existential loneliness that comes from inside. This surprising twist is not the ending of the song, however. The narrator goes on to imagine his wedding night:

> I will carry her across the threshold
> I will make dim the light
> I will attempt to spend my love within her
> Though I will try with all my might
> She will laugh at my mighty sword
> She will laugh at my mighty sword
> Why must everybody laugh at my mighty sword?
> Lord, help me if you will
> Maybe we're both crazy, I don't know
> Maybe that's why I love her so

As with the "Naked Man," the protagonist of this song ultimately stands before us stripped bare. He is not given even the basic right to hide his nakedness. All is revealed, truly, and what is revealed in this poor soul's case is the source of horrible insecurity, something that people literally laugh at: his very manhood is at question, for he is small in his genitalia and impotent (despite referring to his member as a "mighty sword"). We could laugh at this situation, and the song is indeed grimly comic, but that fact that something stops us—perhaps simply the greatness of his dread, his pain—shows that Newman has humanized this backwoods wretch for us. He does this by presenting him in a way that we can relate to, making clear to us that he has feelings we all do—fear, yearning, the need for love and security. Newman has pulled off something different here than social or political commentary: it's one thing to evoke sympathy for people hitting a dead end, traumatized by disaster, forsaken by politicians. But it is something else to present the weird people of our

society and making their fears and hopes so vivid that, when the punchline comes, no one laughs.

The final narrative in the unusual trio is "Back On My Feet Again." This song is the most inscrutable on the album, a tall tale where the previous few songs' weird humor morphs into extravagant surrealism. Delivered as a monologue to his psychiatrist, the narrator's long, strange story is hard to evaluate from the very beginning. Although he speaks in the southern dialect we have become used to by now, he doesn't appear to be your typical southerner. He identifies himself as a wealthy college man and uses the word "Negro," established previously as a northern colloquialism. He looks down on his doctor, claiming he makes more money. This already raises an eyebrow, but when he goes onto say his millworker brother makes more money than the doctor as well, we suddenly realize we are no longer in a world of reality. The song's title phrase is not the hopeful, but somewhat banal, phrase it might first appear to be; the narrator is requesting to be allowed to go home, as he needs permission to leave the hospital. This is a doctor joke, but one with a decidedly dark humor.

After establishing his superiority to the psychiatrist, the narrator goes into a story about a "Negro" that his sister ("a dancer in Baltimore") ran off with. The man ended up being someone else entirely:

> He took her down to Mobile in a railroad train
> He said, "Driver, take me to the Hotel Paree."
> He went into the washroom
> Washed his face and hands
> Doctor, when he come out he was white as you and me
> He said, "Girl, I ain't a Negro I'm a millionaire
> As you can plainly see
> So many women were after my money
> But I'm proud to say you were only after me
> I'm going to teach you to play polo and how to water ski
> And you won't have to dance no more
> And I no longer have to pretend to be

A Negro from the Eastern Shore."

What are we to make of this obvious fantasy? The Eastern Shore Negro sheds his blackness as easily as the (more than likely blue-collar) narrator gains wealth. Perhaps what Newman is concerned with here is the fact that these things should carry so much weight in the first place. In the fantasy world that the patient conjures up, it is telling that he applies his magic to matters of economic status and race—it tells us something about how people experience these things as limiting or emancipating elements in their lives. Each song in the trio avoids the status established as the album's focus, exploring less definitive aspects and considerations of southern identity. Easily mistaken for a minor composition, parked near the end of a record, "Back On My Feet Again" actually taps into the heart of the way race and economic status define us in our society. And, like the two songs that precede it, the humor in "Back On My Feet Again" belies a real desperation.

Following his outlandish story, the patient pleads with his doctor:

Doctor, doctor, what you say
How 'bout letting me out today?
Ain't no reason for me to stay
Everybody's so far away
Get me back on my feet again
Back on my feet again
Open the door and set me free
Get me back on my feet again

Again, Newman catches us, after a humorous set-up, with a moment that asks his audience to consider the implications on the narrator. The narrator's entire story, about his family spread across the U.S., results in him being alone, wishing to be free. Simply, this is a testament to human isolation and just wanting to be out in the world where someone cares.

Perhaps with all these stories, Newman is commenting on the absurdity of the South—or of life. Perhaps he is saying that, beyond politics and society, we are individuals

who are more than the sum of their parts, and life is hard. In a similar way to his use of Johnny Cutler on Side One—yet clearly distinct as well—Newman throws the listener into narratives that consider the human condition, personal heartache, and dimensions of identity rather than politics. Following such straightforward commentary and critique, this detour focuses on the human elements present in the South**.** These aren't just abstract social injustices, lofty serious things—this is a more every day, personal identity perspective. Part of identity is social and cultural, and affects large groups (an argument that Newman himself makes), but here he also distinguishes that personal identity—apart from political, social, and class distinctions—is at stake.

Newman ends *Good Old Boys* with a song that, at first glance, strikes on a surprisingly optimistic note. "Rollin'" is a mellow, seemingly satisfied ending for an album that has taken us to harrowing places. Look more closely, however, and one sees that it is a song not about satisfaction, but resignation. We have returned from the wilds of Cherokee County, the flooded streets of Evangeline, the snow-filled city terrorized by the Naked Man. The style is reminiscent of the album's first half, a personal narrative about vices in a similar vein to "Marie" and "Guilty," though less desperate.

The song begins with a sweet piano tune, and soon Newman's quiet, gentle voice joins in:

> I never drink in the afternoon
> I never drink alone
> But I sure do like a drink or two
> When I get home

Up to this point on the album, Newman has given us every reason to be wary of alcohol. The extent to which it is abused—particularly on Side One—makes it out to be a sinister symbol

of pain, a substance tied to self-loathing and transgressive behavior. However, here, it is calm, gentle, more controlled:

> Every evening what I do
> I sit here in this chair
> I pour myself some whiskey
> And watch my troubles vanish into the air

The saloon life and desperate late-night confessions are a thing of the past. This is a decidedly more benign relationship with alcohol. However, the final lines of the verse indicate self-medication, ritualistic as ever—perhaps this is the price one must pay to be free of the pain, simply by ignoring it. Although there is a simple pleasantness, the narrator is displaying avoidant tendencies.

The chorus is straightforward, the narrator telling us about his new approach to life's difficulties:

> Rollin', rollin'
> Ain't gonna worry no more
> Rollin', rollin'
> Ain't gonna worry no more

He professes that, while there may be aspects of his life that warrant worry, there seems to be little point to it. The music lulls under him, and leads the listener to wonder if we should trust him, or if this is a concerning mindset set to a pleasant tune.

The narrator lists the sources of his worry, but does not indicate if they no longer worry him because he has stopped the bad habits, or simply due to his new mindset:

> Used to worry about gamblin'
> Throwin' my money away
> Used to worry about wastin' time
> And layin' round the house all day

The way these lines are worded indicates that the narrator's worry from these events are a thing of the past. He does seem to distinguish, however subtly, that the actions themselves

may not be. Again, Newman utilizes classic, recognizable vices to indicate pain on the part of the narrator—pain, that in this case, he seems to have escaped.

The song's ending is uplifting:

But I'm all right now
I'm all right now
I never thought I'd make it
But I always do somehow
I'm all right now
Rollin, rollin'
Ain't gonna worry no more
Rollin, rollin
Ain't gonna worry no more

The purpose of the album's final track is ambiguous, but it isn't vague (Coppage, 110). Newman does not distinguish if the narrator's new approach to life is a healthy push to relieve some stress, or a half-assed attempt to avoid his problems. Finishing the album, the listener is primed to be suspicious of alcohol and optimism after all we have been exposed to; whether this is resignation or contentment is difficult to say following the rest of *Good Old Boys*. Still, the optimism present here may indicate more about Newman's attitudes than our narrator's situation: despite the pain, exploitation, and disenfranchisement we have explored as deeply tied to southern identity, Newman seems to indicate with this pleasant final song that there is still room for hope in the South.

Conclusion: Reception and Legacy

Upon its release, *Good Old Boys* hit #36 on the Billboard 200 chart, and rested there for two weeks. It was Newman's first record to crack the Top Forty and, in a record industry-friendly time, when even an album in the chart's bottom rungs could move surprisingly many units, it ultimately managed to go gold—with over 500,000 copies sold. Although *Good Old Boys* achieved moderate commercial success, such a record—that is, one by a cult artist (emphasis on *artist*)—relies heavily on critical reception for how it is ultimately remembered.

As with Newman's previous work, *Good Old Boys* received many positive reviews following the album's release. However, unlike Newman's other albums, it was widely reviewed as a concept album and, in that regard, generally judged a strong achievement. In Loraine Alterman's review for the *New York Times*, she noted that *Good Old Boys* was a success as a southern concept album, due both to Newman's musical and lyrical prowess, as well as the "keen intelligence that gives his songs a clear point of view and strong impact." She appreciated not only Newman's exploration of "the psyche of the South," but what that exploration revealed about the "Northern state of mind." Self-proclaimed "dean of American rock critics," Robert Christgau, gave the album an "A" rating, despite his initial misgivings about Newman's political perspective, noting that Newman never allowed his characters to be "objects of contempt." Noel Coppage, in his take for the *Stereo Review*, remarked that *Good Old Boys* was *"*hilarious, but the nifty side benefits include some damned good sociology, if one is into that, and a musical meeting of the high standards Randy set in 'Sail Away'." He went on to say that, "Newman's tunes are convincing evidence that it was worth all the trouble of setting up America if only to see what it would do to the arts" (110).

Stephen Davis, in his review for *Rolling Stone*, also appreciated the album's ambition, but focused on the darker aspects of the record, stating that, "between flashes of genius and transcendence comes morbidity. After repeated listenings, one impression lingers—Newman is a troubled man." However, he seemed convinced that the morbidity worked for Newman, and concluded that, "*Good Old Boys* is another dark, dark record...a continuation of Newman's deceptive, mercurial work. It mystifies, it confuses, it entertains, it swings. You don't know whether to laugh or cry, and that is Randy Newman's rare and bizarre skill." Although the reviews acknowledged that the material Newman was working with was not easy, *Good Old Boys* was largely accepted as a success.

However, not all of the reviews glowed. Greil Marcus, esteemed rock journalist, was not so pleased with Newman's attempt. Marcus' *Mystery Train* came out in the months following the album, and featured an entire chapter on Newman (quite a tribute, as the other chapters covered such giants as Robert Johnson and Elvis Presley); completed only months before *Good Old Boys*' release, a formal analysis of the album would have to wait for later editions of the book. Although the book's Newman essay did manage to capture key Newmanisms that would help identify the roots of his work, as well as help listeners navigate *Good Old Boys*, Marcus' first official comments on the album came in a 1975 *Village Voice* review of a Newman concert.

The review was a highly critical piece, and would eventually evolve into a "coda" to the Newman essay in later editions of *Mystery Train*. While Marcus admitted that he enjoyed the album upon his first listen, he went on to chastise Newman for he the way he performed it live. Marcus was struck by the expert (and, from his view, ultimately manipulative) gentleness Newman employed when exploring the tragically ridiculous lives of the narrator

and his bride-to-be in "A Wedding In Cherokee County." In concert, Marcus felt that Newman made a joke out of the couple, and said that, "Newman's fucking over of the characters of 'Cherokee County' indicates his lack of trust in the ability of his audience to grasp the subtleties of his songs." Marcus felt that Newman betrayed the compassionate perspective of the album in his concert, and remarked, "Newman, then, is trying to perform a populist act—to write songs that make us care about people we would ordinarily laugh at or dismiss, and to expand his audience by touring for months in all parts of the country—while placing himself and his audience under an elitist umbrella." Marcus, then, saw Newman as profiting off of the very social isolation of the South and lower-class that Newman supposedly underscored with his album by turning it into a laughing stock—the whole thing left a bad taste in his mouth. Newman was pandering to the very prejudices that inspired the album to begin with and, in the process, turned his serious work into a cheap joke.

Yet, despite the rave reviews and Marcus' glaring disappointment, perhaps the most significant contemporary review was Dave Hickey's, deliberately published in *Country Music* magazine. Hickey felt great empathy for what Newman was attempting in *Good Old Boys*. Hickey began by explaining that he had placed the review in *Country Music* "because there is a chance that the people who can feel and understand this record probably won't ever hear it," admitting that, while it wasn't exactly country music, "it's a record about people who listen to country music" (10). Hickey's approach to the album differed not just in the publication, but the content; much like *Good Old Boys*, the focus of Hickey's review was the South. When talking about "Rednecks," Hickey stated,

> Now, even though the song goes on to point out that the North is just as prejudiced, only more hypocritical, a song like this is going to hurt a lot of people's pride. Because it cuts both ways. Because it's true. But only those Southerners who can

> laugh at themselves, who know what it's like to be dirt poor and white and unable to talk back to the smarmy creep in the television, will understand how *sad* this song is.

To Hickey, Newman was not only successful in his attempts to capture the struggles of the South, but the feelings of southerners. Newman didn't only observe the pain, he *felt* it, and he made his listener feel it too. Hickey ended his review simply with, "You might like this record, too. If you don't, that's okay. It's only the truth. It's only music" (10).

Over time, the album only seems to rise in listeners' regards. One is struck by the frequency and vigor with which music critics were drawn back to *Good Old Boys*, and evaluate it even years after its release. In 2000, poet and writer Anthony Walton published an essay titled, "Randy Newman: (Not) Through Rose Colored Glasses." The review of *Good Old Boys* examined the work as both a piece of literature and authentic exploration of the American South, stating, "these characters' pain and ignorance constitute a world-view, a vision in which irony cannot be separated from tragedy: Call it Stephen Foster on acid, Flannery O'Connor in song; at their best, these songs become *lieder*—art songs—of the American experience" (297). Throughout the essay, Walton examined Newman's expert commentary and honesty regarding social and political dynamics in the South, and admired his artistic approach on the record, stating, "Newman's ability in *Good Old Boys* to inhabit the interior lives of poor whites, broken and deranged by their marginal status in society, is uncanny" (Walton, 298).[15] Walton was ultimately impressed that Newman could "achieve something that might have been thought impossible: the humanization of that flag-waving,

[15] Regarding social and political commentary, Walton was particularly impressed with the way Newman addressed racism on the album, stating, "Newman says what he sees and thinks, and he pulls no punches, something very few white artists working in any genre are able or willing to do on this particular subject. He does this from the inside, with tough-minded compassion for the racist—realizing, as Martin Luther King, Jr., often communicated, that *both* sides suffered terribly from the death grip on America's collective soul that the Jim Crow system imposed" (297). In regards to Newman's use of racial slurs, Walton remarked, "Newman has been criticized for nearly thirty years for his use of the 'n-word' on this album—as if one could tell a true story of the South without it. As if one could tell a true story of the United States without it" (Walton, 299).

know-nothing Rebel" (Walton, 299). Walton's review added to those that deemed *Good Old Boys* a standout record and kept the ongoing conversation.

Several reviews followed Walton's, all written by people with positive views of *Good Old Boys*. In his 2002 review of the album for *The A.V. Club,* Keith Phipps said, "If the best evidence of genius is the ability to hold two contradictory ideas at once, few of Randy Newman's songs fail to offer evidence of genius." In his 2013 review for the *Vinyl District*, Michael Little noted that Newman's exposure to and understanding of the South gave *Good Old Boys* its outstanding quality, and, like Phipps, commented on Newman's use contradictory elements, stating, "No one...has ever written songs that are as funny or as deep, and the amazing thing about Newman is that, unlike the Dylan of Big Pink, he possesses the ability to do both in the same song." In his 40th anniversary review of the album in 2014, Kevin Courrier praised *Good Old Boys* as an apt representation and exploration of the experience of being an American, and commented on its lasting presence, stating, "Newman's work on Good Old Boys comes across today as refreshingly candid, music that engages us with ideas and challenges our prejudices and assumptions."

The most recent review of *Good Old Boys* was Winston Cook-Wilson's *Pitchfork* review, published in October, 2016. Preceding the 2016 Presidential election, Cook-Wilson remarked not only on the strengths and successes of the album as an artistic work, but on its lasting relevance. He ends the review with:

> Randy Newman, in that search for meaning, became the king of the unreliable narrator in American popular music, and one of rock's greatest lyricists full-stop. But part of earning the distinction involved venturing into dark corners, and inhabiting them for a while; in his Good Old Boys review for Rolling Stone, Stephen Davis would use this logic to diagnose Newman as deeply "troubled." It was a dirty job, and certainly, no one had to do it. It was usually thankless and almost always alienating. But it also yielded one of the best singer-songwriter albums of the 1970s, which remains as shocking, pristine, and regrettably relevant as the day it was released.

It is this relevance Cook-Wilson describes that illuminates the profundity of *Good Old Boys*. Randy Newman successfully captures, distills, and magnifies political, historical, and social experiences in order to create a searing commentary on and exploration of American southern identity. His use of character establishes human experience in these events as both the primary focus and the primary lever of his work. As he addresses themes of racism, classism, regionalism, and other divisive elements present in the past, his present, and our present, Newman never forgoes the central importance of the humanity at stake. It is a poignant, painful, funny look at the way that mistreatment and misunderstanding disenfranchise a people. Hierarchies are self-perpetuating, particularly when they are not identified. Newman, while he does not validate the poisonous elements of the South, also does not dismiss the South's defiance against enormous odds—natural disaster, corrupt politicians, persisting poverty. The list goes on.

The album presents itself in three stages: the grim unraveling of the "redneck," the exploitation of pain, and the release. The album originates in the people, in the way they view themselves to the way they view the "other"; *Good Old Boys* underscores the essential loss of humanity that occurs when people—whoever they may be—are replaced with faulty perceptions. It holds a light up to the ugliness and the honesty of these perspectives before shifting higher and exploring the way these qualities are distilled by politicians for personal gain—this dynamic maintains persisting relevance today, particularly regarding the "basket of deplorables." In the final songs of the album, the political is shed and the humanity underneath is returned to with a weary understanding. The differences and particularities of southerners are suddenly less foreign and the simple quality of being alive is in the fore.

In focusing on the South's humanity, Newman expanded beyond the region. *Good Old Boys* is an exploration of the pressures of life through the prism of the South and, by looking through that prism, the view from the other side is fractured and muddled with our own reflection. Newman does not only reveal the complexity of the region—and the country—but reminds his listener that we are a part of it. We are all group identities, political ammo, and crazy humans.

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